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Four Times Exceptional: Reflections on Motherhood and Teaching College Mathematics¹

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Synopsis

This essay discusses the challenges of mothering four very different children—one adopted, one gifted, one anxious and one dyslexic child—and the impact of this experience on teaching mathematics at the college level.

Keywords: *children, therapy, teaching, adoption, gifted, anxiety, dyslexia*

My earliest childhood memories rotate around two different roles—teaching stuffed animals how to do arithmetic and being a mom to several dolls at once. About two decades later, I found myself completing a dissertation on Lie groups, while dreaming of becoming a mother. At that point I knew I would pursue a position in a primarily teaching institution, because I really wanted a big family. In 1993 I met my future husband at a mathematics conference, and it seemed this dream could become a reality. I never thought I would become the mother of four truly exceptional children. I also never imagined the gratitude I feel to my husband and to my children for all the lessons they have taught me. These lessons of commitment, dedication, tireless effort and creativity have entered and stay with me in each of the courses I teach.

¹With gratitude to my husband Francis Fung.

Dessi

My husband and I had always talked about adoption. I had grown up in Bulgaria and we both knew there were many abandoned children there, forgotten in state-run understaffed orphanages. Then at some point, I got very impatient with our attempts to have a biological child, so in 1998 we started our adoption journey. Our daughter Dessislava (“Dessi”) was the only baby we were shown by our agency. She was very tiny for an almost two-year old and clearly suffering from neglect. We embraced our new role as parents that summer. Our social worker could have not prepared us for any of challenges that lay ahead. It is an interesting parallel that during those first two years we had Dessi at home, I had to complete my graduate work and look for a teaching position, again completely unprepared for the challenges lying ahead in a tenure-track position in a primarily teaching institution. Neither parenting nor a career comes with any guarantees.

Dessi has brought so much joy to our family. Her light-heartedness, zest for living life to the fullest, and her charm are irresistible to all who meet her. We often joke that she led the way to giving us her three siblings: a brother Zlatomir born less than a year after her arrival in our home, a sister Kaya born three years later, and a brother Plamen born three years after that. Parenting Dessi has been the greatest challenge I have faced as a mother. It has taught me more about perseverance, patience, flexibility, and personal growth than anything else. I see my growth as a college teacher fully interconnected with my growth as a mother, and I attribute that growth to all of my children, but Dessi definitely has been at the center of it.

Children like Dessi, affectionately referred to as “kids from hard places” in the adoption world, come into families with severe trauma. Dessi cried in her crib for days as a baby and no caring adults answered her calls. So she learned not to trust and not to love. She entered a permanent state of “fight or flight”, where she had to be in survival mode and in control all the time. After a couple of years with us, Dessi made tremendous strides in getting on track developmentally (she was severely delayed at age 2), but her emotional well-being was an entirely different matter. As a preschooler, Dessi “shopped” for parents wherever we went. She charmed strangers and jumped into their laps. She gave hugs to whoever paid any attention to her. She was fake and unresponsive when asked for real affection.

She was defiant in pre-school and at home. At this point, my husband and I realized we needed help. We needed to learn a different kind of parenting, so we could help our daughter heal from her past and attach to us for real. This landed us in the Attachment and Counseling Center in Minnesota.² It was there that we learned about Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD),³ a condition that awakens pure dread in adoptive parents. Depending on the severity of this condition, RAD children grow up capable of crazy lying, stealing, torturing pets, and setting fires, due to their lack of conscience. But even in its more benign forms, Reactive Attachment Disorder is extremely challenging to deal with—children do not reciprocate affection and have difficulty forming secure attachments to their parents. During this first round of therapy, Dessi learned about her story—her abandonment, life in the orphanage, and adoption. She received her first round of trauma therapy EMDR.⁴

During that year, I was a first-year professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Moving from Cornell to Wisconsin-Stout was a rough transition for me. I had to find new ways to reach my classes of hunting enthusiasts. All the books I was reading on different parenting techniques were helpful for deciding on the spot when to switch gears in getting these students involved in their learning—putting them in small groups, having them present their work, and working on projects related to hunting. The next year, I moved on to a tenure-track job at Western Oregon University, and then eventually to Worcester State University in Massachusetts.

Most teenagers struggle with identity, but this struggle is much more real for adoptees. Dessi was no different—she struggled mightily in high school (some of it was due to her severe Attention Deficit Disorder), both academically and socially. She got into an altercation involving a knife getting pulled on her.

²Website at <http://www.familyattachment.com/>, last accessed on July 24, 2018.

³“Reactive attachment disorder is a rare but serious condition in which an infant or young child doesn’t establish healthy attachments with parents or caregivers.” See more at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/reactive-attachment-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20352939>, last accessed on July 24, 2018.

⁴“Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy is an integrative psychotherapy approach that has been extensively researched and proven effective for the treatment of trauma.” See more at https://emdria.site-ym.com/?page=emdr_therapy, last accessed on July 24, 2018.

And once we got Child Protective Services called on us. Our response was to take her for another round of attachment therapy at the Attachment Institute of New England.⁵

The interesting thing about this second round was that it spurred me into examining my own childhood traumas and how these experiences could transfer into my relationship with all my children, and with all my students in the classroom. After going through several years of EMDR and other therapy myself, I am able to feel growing empathy for all my students and to embrace the growing mindset philosophy fully. I got the courage to teach all my classes in an inquiry-oriented or inquiry-based mindset, while being in a very traditional mathematics department. I found my tribe of like-minded educators at workshops and conferences and even got some of my colleagues in my home department to observe and enjoy my teaching. It is my hope that I continue to explore how creating a shared positive energy environment can improve student learning of mathematics.

Dessi is currently a student at a nearby university. Even though, at age 21, she still has difficulty understanding her personal worth fully, she is definitely moving forward. Her attachment to us is growing continuously, as we continue to provide a safe environment for her to fail and learn from her mistakes. And all due to my experiences with Dessi, I have been more open to and welcoming about failure in my classroom as well. Just this past semester, inspired by a colleague who shared at the 2017 Joint Mathematics Meetings that giving students actual credit for productive failures has worked well in his classes, I ended up offering my students 5% for presenting false starts, mistakes, and uncertainties in two of my upper-level courses and saw how powerfully this changed their attitude towards “failure.”

Zlatomir

My husband and I knew our first-born son was different at a very young age—he was a very intense baby and toddler. By age three it was clear to us that our boy was intellectually gifted. We signed him up for Suzuki cello lessons as a way to challenge him and soon found out that Zlatomir and the cello were meant for each other.

⁵Website at <http://www.attachmentnewengland.com>, last accessed on July 24, 2018.

Trying to support a musically gifted child without being at all versed in how the classical music world works has been another incredible learning opportunity for me. How do I get the school system to meet the needs of a child who functions several grades ahead and learns so quickly as to be constantly bored in the classroom? How do I help him choose the right cello teachers? Following his lead and listening to his needs has proven to be the right approach. This again translates directly into dealing with those exceptionally gifted mathematics students who enter my classroom every once in a while. It seems they know what works best for them and facilitating their growth in their way is my role as their instructor.

Zlatomir was the reason for our coast-to-coast move from Oregon to Massachusetts in 2008. He was outgrowing the musical resources of Oregon. But this meant that I had to give up a tenured professorship in a very progressive and friendly department. I had to start again as an assistant professor, this time as a mother of a three, six, nine, and twelve year old.

For several years, Zlatomir was focusing his efforts on his cello playing and not worrying about the local public school not meeting his intellectual needs. Then he got depressed about going to school, so I had to find a good home-schooling program for him when he was twelve. After much research and thought, we chose the Oak Meadow School out of Vermont.⁶ For a year Zlatomir had to come to my university with me, since he was enrolled in a variety of classes there. Then he decided he really needed to work with this famous cello pedagogue at the Juilliard School, and my husband and I had to drive him twice per month to New York City—for a total of about 8 hours in the car—every other Sunday.

It was during this intense period that I really let go of whatever perfectionism had remained inside me from my graduate school days, and learned how to quickly put together lessons, while making dinner, and helping kids with school work. I believe this flexibility and ability to multitask makes me a very dynamic and enthusiastic professor. My classrooms get chaotic at times, just like my household, but they are welcoming and supportive of students.

⁶Oak Meadow School, website at <https://oakmeadow.com/>, last accessed on July 24, 2018.

As I am wrapping up this essay, Zlatomir just completed his first semester as a full-time student at the Juilliard School. His Oak Meadow and Worcester State University days made him into a thoughtful and emancipated learner—something I hope all of my students learn. He has set big goals for himself and is working on these, tirelessly, day after day. His deep intense music making never ceases to amaze me.

Kaya

Our second daughter Kaya was born during my first year at Western Oregon University. She was a calm sweet baby, the kind I could take to class and she would just smile at my students. And I did have to do this, since a very short one-quarter leave put me back in the classroom when Kaya was merely ten weeks old. She turned into a very capable, precocious, and independent toddler. By the time she was seven, she could cook a complete meal from a recipe in a cookbook.

It was easy for Kaya to get “forgotten” amidst three higher-needs kids. She started exhibiting signs of anxiety as a preschooler. It seemed all the one-on-one time I was giving her was not enough to keep her centered. Dessi and Kaya shared a room in our new house in Massachusetts, and Kaya often had her toys destroyed or stolen. Kaya grew very resentful of her older sister and all the negative attention Dessi was getting. At the age of eight, Kaya came to me proclaiming she had read about all the symptoms of anxiety and depression on *Wikipedia*, and she had decided she had every single one of them. At this point, my husband and I decided it was time to seek professional help. The years of therapy she has been through have been really helpful. Now Dessi and Kaya share a strong sibling relationship and enjoy each other’s company.

Being Kaya’s mom has made me very aware of the students in my classroom who do good work, but do not stand out in any particular way. I am much more aware of their struggles and I strive to never make them feel invisible.

Another challenge for Kaya was the feeling that she could never be as good as her older brother at music, yet she loves music with all her heart. At age twelve, she decided to give singing a try. She is now an accomplished pop song writer and jazz singer. She is forging her own path and finally thriving!

Plamen

My youngest son Plamen could not learn how to read. He had trouble sounding out words, even though his speech was very advanced for his age. His sweet personality made him an easy target for bullies. He was entirely too miserable at the beginning of third grade—in his own words, he was feeling like he was stupid and clearly somehow less than the other kids, because he could not read, write, or do basic math well. Additionally, he kept getting bullied physically and the school was not being proactive at preventing further incidents. At this point, I pulled him out of the school system and enrolled him in Oak Meadow. I also had him tested for learning disabilities. It turned out he has dyslexia, but he is also verbally gifted, a quite rare occurrence.

I had to find a way to continue teaching mathematics at the college level, while homeschooling two children. Luckily, a new “unschooling” center opened nearby and Plamen could go there for the hours I was at work. We homeschooled all year round, since it was taking my son a long time to write a paragraph and even longer to remember what the product of 6 and 7 was. He seemed to make slow progress, through special reading programs and occupational therapy. After three years of homeschooling, I was totally exhausted (he often procrastinated on getting his work done and I wanted to be just his mom again and no longer his teacher). I asked him if he would consider returning to the public school. He enthusiastically agreed and is now an honors student at the local middle school.

It was really interesting for me to see how an “unschooling” center for homeschoolers worked. Children at the Macomber Center⁷ were left to choose what they wanted to do and what they wanted to learn. This is a radical view of education and certainly might not work for all students, but I feel that from the time I spent at the Center, I learned how to be less in control in my classroom and give my students more choices of what and how to learn mathematics.

Plamen, just like all my other children, has taught me so much about continuing to learn every single day. I feel as comfortable discussing how to do an induction proof as how to tutor a dyslexic child how to read.

⁷Website at <http://macombercenter.org/>, last accessed on July 24, 2018.

“How do I best serve the needs of my children?” is analogous to the question of “How do I best meet the needs of my students?”. It seems there is always more to learn, and this is what makes education so powerful!

Motherhood and Teaching Mathematics

In my first year of teaching, I ran into my undergraduate advisor at a conference. He saw my two oldest kids, and could not help but express disappointment that my untimely motherhood was the end of my career as a mathematician. At the time, I was too stunned to respond. The answer I should have given him is that the career I chose, as a professor at a comprehensive state university, has been truly enriched by my experience as a mother. Overcoming adversity, looking for different solution paths, never giving up on my children (and my students) have made my teaching an exciting and enjoyable experience. I believe that life in general, and teaching in particular, are both a journey. It is not about being perfect and always making the best choices; it is about striving to do one's best at any given moment. I hope this essay encourages younger women who are college mathematics faculty to follow their dreams of both motherhood and satisfying careers.